

Full Length Research Paper

Gender destereotyping in early childhood development or shrewd opportunism? A case of male students at Masvingo Teachers' College, Zimbabwe

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This research aimed at unraveling the mystery behind motivation of male student teachers in joining Early Childhood Development (ECD) in the face of negative societal attitudes. The interview, the questionnaire and document analysis were used in the process of data gathering. The researchers found that most students are motivated by external or extrinsic factors, such as deployment advantages, employment in better paying non-governmental organizations and professional advancement opportunities as 'minorities' in the area. This is a worrying phenomenon since the presence of the male ECD teacher from a distance looks like remarkable achievement in terms of deconstructing gender stereotyping in the area. It is recommended that to change negative societal attitudes towards male ECD teachers, more concerted efforts must be made to 'sell' the programme so that stakeholders are well informed. There should be mechanisms in place at college level to counsel students and therefore, forearm students who are forced to 'cross the floor' under pressure from traditional societal attitudes to remain steadfast.

Key words: Early childhood development, male teachers, motivation, sex, gender.

INTRODUCTION

Until very recently primary education in Zimbabwe entailed seven years of education, that is, Grades 1 to 7. Teachers' colleges training primary school teachers therefore had basically two groups of students, the infant specialist to cater for grades 1 to 3 and the general student, who was expected to handle any grade hence the description 'general'-the Jack or Jill of all grades. The latter group was also called the junior primary school teacher, which implied that those in this group would be expected to handle only pupils from grades 4 to 7. In 2004, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture instituted a policy that directed all primary schools to attach at least two early childhood development classes for children of the 3 to 5 year age-group (Statutory instru-

ment 106 of 2005 and secretary's circular 14 of 2004 and 12 of 2004). This emerged from the Nziramasanga Commission, which observed that the majority of Zimbabwean children particularly those in the rural and poor areas did not have access to ECD programmes before entry into grade one (Nziramasanga, 1999).

Previously the ECD programmes though under the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture were not part of the formal educational system but were community based or individual entrepreneurial initiatives (Dyanda et al., 2005). Of late the formal primary school has therefore been extended in terms of its sphere of influence to cater for the 'pre-school' age groups. Perhaps pre-grade 1 could be a more befitting description for this category of learners. These have been and are still referred to by both the professionals (some of them) and the general public as zero grade, the obvious dilemma being that grades 1 to 7 were already in existence in the school

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system when the former introduced a term, which is denigrating since it implies that the pupils and their teachers will be doing nothing. This explains why the little 'intruders' have not been accommodated in the best of classrooms in quite a number of schools both urban and rural that the researchers have visited while on teaching practice supervision.

At one school in Masvingo town 25 pupils were packed in their classroom, a tiny laundry room. At another in the same town where one of the researchers visited in the thick of winter, the researcher was disgusted by the exposure the little ones were forced to endure and brought this up with the school authorities who promised to discuss the issue with the responsible authority, the city council. Apparently the pupils were housed in a tiny changing room at the sports field where they could not all fit, resulting in them doing all of their activities outdoor regardless of the state of the atmosphere.

In Chiredzi town a student in the Class of 2006 to 2008 and his 27 learners were housed in a 3 by 4 m dilapidated structure up to the end of his teaching practice year in spite of voicing concern very early in the year. The school's responsible authority is into sugar production and exporting and may not be too financially challenged to at least do some basic infrastructural touch ups on the said structure. In a nutshell the addition of ECD A and ECD B classes came as a 'surprise' to many school administrations who found their houses too full to accommodate the expanded family (the result of an unplanned pregnancy which bore quintuplets) as a result they sent some to the verandah, garage, kraal and kennel! After all they were 0 grades! In spite of the hostile reception by many schools the ECD option continues to be taken up by many students including males. The teaching profession especially at primary school level is perceived by many as a female domain and the teaching of the young as a female preserve (see analysis of findings). Males seen showing interest in this area are in the majority of cases derided by mostly males hence comments like '*Makashaya course yokuita here?*' (Did you run out of course options?), '*vepfungwa doko vanoda kutamba nezvana zvisati zvava mature*' (those of low intellectual output who lazy around with immature children) and '*Kudealer nezvima 0 grade zvinonetsa. Zwana zviya zvimwe zvinenge zvichichema, zvinotoda vane patience zvikuru vakati kureyi uye madzimai*' (Dealing with 0 grades (*a denigrating description*) is problematic. Those little ones will ever be crying. It requires one endowed with loads of patience especially elderly teachers and women). The aforementioned comments came from some of the respondents. Earlier researchers found similar negative attitudes as reflected in their observation:

The Evaluation found strong and negative views regarding the employment of men in ECD programmes/classes. The views against the

employment of men in ECD were very specific (Dyanda et al., 2005:79)

In spite of the negative societal attitudes towards males taking up the role of ECD teaching, some males continue to show interest in the profession. The researchers sought to investigate the motivation behind such decisions.

Sex, gender and gender sensitivity

Gender issues have become topical issue all over the world hence, Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals is on promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women. This has been necessitated by the fact that women and girls have been marginalized since time immemorial. Thus, in the people's quest to address the disparities existing between men and women, gender has been misconstrued to refer to women. It has also been associated with radical feminism hence, whenever gender issues crop up; people believe it is about women or the girl-child. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between sex and gender in order to properly contextualize the concepts 'gender sensitivity' and 'gender awareness', which are crucial in the realization of such a goal. It is also important to note here that the school plays a pivotal role in this endeavour as a major agent of socialization especially at the impressionable early childhood stage, which is the focus of this study. Sex refers to 'male-female differences that are biological' (Ministry of Education Sport and Culture and UNICEF, 1998:5) while gender refers to 'socially allotted roles, activities and responsibilities, which are ascribed to women and men on account of their sex' (McFadden, 2003:7). Sex is a biological concept, human beings are male or female from the point of conception-it is a matter of genes, gonads and hormones. People acquire characteristics, which are perceived as masculine and feminine...'(Talbot, 1998:7). There is a universal agreement on what constitutes maleness or femaleness; for example the organs. One's sex can only be changed through surgery otherwise one normally remains male or female for life. While sex differences between men and women are universal and fixed, gender differences are not as can be drawn from its definition. Gender can be defined as socially constructed differences between men and women, which are learned, change over time and have wide variation within and between cultures (Meena, 1992; Marcus and Ducklin, 1998; Shaba, 2002). This is reinforced by major agents of socialization such as the family, peer groups, school and the mass media. One can perceive sex as natural and gender as 'nurtural' (Nyoni et al., 2008). In an effort to differentiate the two, Talbot (1998:7) notes, that 'unlike sex, gender is not binary'.

Femaleness, femininity and feminism

Femaleness, Femininity and Feminism are concepts that are closely related to gender sensitivity as their understanding helps further clarify the distinction between the terms gender and sex. Femaleness, as pointed earlier, is natural/biological and normally constant throughout one's natural life. This also applies to maleness. Femininity refers to what a particular society views as the role of a person who is born female. One is therefore born female but not necessarily feminine so femininity, just like gender, is a social construct. A particular social group chooses what roles to allot to males and females whether powerful or powerless. For example, males and females are perceived differently in matrilineal and patrilineal social groups. In patriarchal ones, traits such as sweetness, modesty, subservience and humility are looked at as feminine (Toril Moi in Jefferson and Robey, 1986) while adventurousness, toughness, roughness and assertiveness are seen as masculine and expected of males. In the end, those so-called traits of femininity and masculinity become stereotypes that each particular society or group expects men and women to abide with in order to fit and not be labeled deviants. Macionis (1989) actually points out that these stereotypes influence society's attitudes towards men and women either positively or negatively. For example, men are viewed as strong and powerful while women are viewed as weak and emotional.

Young children are viewed as delicate and the 'soft' female is supposed to handle them not the rough male hence, the 'onslaught' on males who dare to cross the divide and invade a 'female domain' in the eyes of patriarchy. Assertions like Aristotle's that females are female by virtue of a lack of certain qualities and St. Thomas Aquinas' that women are imperfect men (Selden and Widdowson, 1993) are both indicative of the subjectivity with which gender can be viewed resulting in gender roles, which are also socially defined and prescribed. Thus, women have always had to work against the grain in order to negate the deeply entrenched gender biases. These socially defined and prescribed roles result in women ending up doing reproductive and community duties with no monetary value attached while men do 'productive' tasks with high monetary value attached impacting greatly on gender relations throughout the individuals' lives. This, in turn, determines ownership of property, access to resources, distribution and control of resources, allocation of social positions and distribution of power (Shaba and Mahuku, 2003). However, it is important to note that these gender roles are not static; they are constructed by people so they can as well be deconstructed over time by the same. In other words, since gender stereotypes are socially constructed, they can and should be socially deconstructed resulting in gender destereotyping.

Gender issues should be seen as efforts made in an endeavour to create space for individuals (both male and

female) to achieve their full potential in all aspects of life. In short, the sensitization and eventual destereotyping will be aimed at achieving gender equality, which means '...equality at all levels of education and in all areas of work, equal control over resources and equal representation in public and political life' (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2005:14). Gender equality ensures that individuals are given the opportunity to self-actualize regardless of the biological accident of sex.

A related concept which needs brief mention here is feminism, which is a political position committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism (Toril Moi in Jefferson and Robey, 1986). Feminism therefore looks at distribution of power between males and females the aim being creation of gender parity or 'sex blindness' in all spheres of life. By implication one can be female but not feminine or feminist, male but not masculine as seen by his or her society.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research procedures were mainly employed to collect and analyze data. This research design's focus is primarily on the process rather than the product, looks at how people in a particular setting interpret their experiences, views the researcher as the major data-gathering instrument in the field and is descriptive as well as inductive (Bogden and Biklen, 1982; Merriam, 1988; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Best and Kahn, 1993; Creswell, 1994). The qualitative paradigm is concerned mainly with the process hence, the photographic descriptions characterizes of write-ups of researches done with such a philosophical standpoint, the current one which quotes 'verbatim' what respondents actually said or wrote down. Since it is very much dependent on the researcher(s) as the main data-gathering instrument(s) -the researchers had to set aside time to leisurely interview, one to one, the people concerned, that is, the Lecturer in charge of early childhood development and both early childhood development and non- early childhood development students. The interview was chosen because it affords the interviewer the opportunity to have access to spontaneous responses that reflect the true feelings and attitudes of respondents. The interviewers were able to detect and exploit 'slips of the tongue' (or mind?), which give away what is embedded in the psyche. The data gathering technique enables the user to have an opportunity to let the respondent clarify issues. Body language was also scrutinized and further probing done when certain behavioural cues warranted that.

In as far as student respondents were concerned the researchers included 'warm-up questions', questions which had nothing or very little to do with the issue at hand. Researchers deemed it desirable to have such questions in order to assist the respondent to have a soft landing: it was an interview and not an interrogation so we wanted our respondents to feel very much at home. This approach is informed by the Shona adage '*kukwira gomo hupoterera*' (loosely translated 'climbing a mountain is a circumlocutious exercise'. This suggests that the journey to the summit of a mountain is not a straight vertical line affair). Data-generation also included administering to respondents an open 'questionnaire' on 'Why I preferred the General Course to ECD/ the ECD to the General Course/My views on Male ECD trainee teachers'. This was in actual fact a blank sheet on which respondents were asked to justify their course options or their views on Male ECD trainee teachers in writing. As researchers we felt that such a 'blank cheque' would

provide the clientele the unfettered opportunity to expend at will and in the process show what substance makes up their character or those they would be writing about. The researchers also used different open-ended questionnaires for part 1 and part 3 students that focused on stakeholders' attitudes towards male ECD trainee teachers. They were requested to comment on attitudes of the following towards male ECD trainee teachers:

- i. Fellow student teachers at college and on teaching practice.
- ii. ECD and non-ECD pupils.
- iii. ECD teachers.
- iv. non-ECD teachers.
- v. ECD para-professionals.
- vi. Members of the community.
- vii. Close relatives.

The questionnaire afforded the researchers the opportunity to scrutinize responses meticulously and leisurely because these were engraved on paper: each word used was literally put under the microscope and meaning deduced. The written word is a product of careful thought hence the marked interest in the diction by respondents. The interview as said earlier emits spontaneous responses while the questionnaire accords the respondent time to reflect and edit responses hence there is balance and complementarities when the two are co-employed.

In addition to the interview and the questionnaire the researchers also analyzed statistics provided by the Lecturer in Charge of Early Childhood Development and the college administration. The researchers deemed it prudent to generate data through several avenues in order to, as much as possible, come up with as total a picture as was possible. Also integral to the data generation were document analysis and observation.

The interview, the questionnaire and document analysis were meant to complement each other to achieve triangulation. Each one of them has strengths and weaknesses-the relative weaknesses of each mode of data generation are made up for by the other co-employed techniques.

Out of a population of 22 Third Year male students 15 returned the questionnaire and were available for the interview since they showed interest.

All the five First Year male students responded to the questionnaire and three were interviewed as well. In addition to the above, 14 General Course students from both the Part 1 and 3 groups were given an open 'questionnaire' on 'Why I preferred the General Course to ECD'. This was in actual fact a blank sheet on which respondents were required to justify their course option. It should be noted that besides the statistics provided by the Lecturer in Charge of Early Childhood Development on Class of 2007 which was on Teaching Practice, there were no further dealings with this group. The researchers believed that Class of 2006, the pioneers of early childhood development at Masvingo teachers' college who had had a year's teaching practice would be interesting to deal with. Pioneers face daunting challenges venturing in environments, which would not have been trodden before, at least in their part of the world. We also thought that the Class of 2008 to 2010, that is, the first years, would also be interesting to work with since:

- i. Their male-female ratio had drastically dropped vis a vis the pioneers' yet they were at the college during the same time with the latter who were returning students.
- ii. As freshmen (sic) we thought their 'unspoilt' view would reveal interesting facts compared to the final years'.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were no selection tests for classes of 2006 and

2007. The department enrolled all who indicated willingness to train as ECD teachers. It should be noted that the class of 2006 was the pioneer group and 8 Teaching Practice distinctions were achieved (1 male and 7 females).

To come up with the final list for the Class of 2008 a test had to be administered since there were almost 200 applicants. All the males who had indicated some willingness to join ECD were enrolled therefore real competition was among females. Males had an easy stroll because according to the LIC, the department wanted to help adjust societal perceptions on ECD seen currently as a female preserve. He observed that most males were doing well when it came to the theoretical aspects of the course but visibly struggled when it came to practicals. Asked why he chose to specialize in infant education when he enrolled at the college about a decade earlier when attitudes towards male infant teachers might have been worse than at present, the LIC in fact thought that by indicating that he, a male person, wanted to train as an infant teacher would enhance his chances of securing a place. Then teacher training vacancies were not as readily available due to the high demand and the higher status of the teaching profession which has since plummeted. Tables 1 and 2 gives a summary of Class of 2006 male students' perceptions on how they are perceived by other students and other members of the community.

The researchers are of the opinion that presentation of some of what respondents actually said or wrote down verbatim is in line with the goal of qualitative research which is "to portray the complex pattern of what is being studied in sufficient depth of detail so that one who has not experienced it can understand it" (Ary et al., 1990: 445). The following are selected unedited responses from some of the respondents:

Reasons for choosing the general course ahead of the ECD

(Respondent: 24 year old Final year male. Text: unedited)

Impatience:

I did not see myself as a person who could tolerate young children's noise-the children would constantly cry about their mother, hunger, friends, home etc. and could not figure myself handling all that 'chaos' in the class.

I also could not imagine lowering myself intellectually to the level of those youngsters. As someone who had the opportunity to reach 'A'-level and doing challenging subjects like Maths at 'A'-level, I even had problems at home in solving some Maths problems for my young brother who was Form 3, then how was it possible for me to lower myself to an ECD class level?

Table 1. Early childhood development enrolment as at 10/05/08.

Class	Year group	Male	Female	Total	Males as % of ECD population
2008 to 2010	Year 1	10	103	113	8.85
2007 to 2009	Year 2	8	81	89	8.99
2006 to 2008	Year 3	22	81	99	22.22
Grand totals		40	265	301	13.29

Table 2. Class of 2006 male perception.

ECD male respondents' perceptions on how they are perceived	Number of respondents
Fellow students (non-ECD) reflected negative attitudes towards them	10
ECD learners' attitudes towards them were negative	2
Non-ECD learners' attitudes towards them was negative	4
ECD teachers at their schools expressed the view that the domain they had entered was inappropriate for males	3
Paraprofessionals (all female) were not co-operative may be because they saw them as threats	11
Non-ECD teachers perceived them as having made a wrong option	10
The community in which they were operating could be characterized as exuding generally a negative attitude seeing them as perverted and having inferior qualifications compared to the other teachers	9
Close relatives did not approve the choice or approved it under protest	5

N = 12.

Dignity, respect and pride:

As a person who reached 'A'-level, many people, myself included, thought that teaching was not the very best for me, let alone ECD. So I could not imagine my friends who learnt with me at school only to find me playing with an ECD class...I felt that it was kinda degrading for me so I felt the General Course was better.

I could not imagine myself working with old age people as these have generally 'ruled' the ECD over the years. I could not imagine in a lecture room at college with much older people than me as well as in the school after qualification with old people or those old teachers who are over 60 years being my workmates, I mean it was not appealing to me so I thought I would find people of my age in the General Course, hence I my decision to select the General Course ahead of the ECD.

Perceptions on male ECD students

(Respondent: 22 year old female first year general course student)

Long ago man did not want to be involved with young

children but nowadays there are a number of men in the Early Childhood Development. Normally it was the woman who interacted more with children.

Men who take part in the Early Childhood Development are lazy to think and get involved in the challenging issues. Though some may have children at heart most of the men are clowns who believe in joking around. Naturally men are believed to be tough guys who like rough jobs and usually they do not want to be associated with children. Most men are involved in complex jobs hence being involved teaching children especially infants leaves a lot to desire.

Infants knock off at noontime, little paperwork and they always playing games. Men do not like changing nappies, feeding or playing with children but most cases they involved in diverse duties.

However a few are keen to change our perception about men. These men are unique and they want to satisfy the phrase gender equality.

Fellow students' attitudes from the aforementioned examples and others not included here clearly discouraging to the male ECD student teacher. Comments like '*vepfungwa doko vanoda kutamba nezvana zvisati zvava mature*' (those of low intellectual

output who lazy around with immature children) coming especially from male non-ECD students. The student claimed that the ECD department had to address the students when a number of them 'defected' to join the general course group. He claimed that they were initially 13 and 5 remain and that his nerves were stilled by the efforts of the Lecturer in Charge of ECD who happened to be male. The seriousness of the problem of crossing floors was trivialized by the LIC during a follow up interview with one of the researchers claiming that during the early weeks students may make uninformed course option choices that fortunately they can reverse if they negotiate the U-turn before registration with the University of Zimbabwe, the certificating authority. It may be necessary to point out that the issue of students who initially opted to do ECD who later joined the general group was raised by two students in separate interviews and that the issue was 'spontaneously' brought to the fore by respondents in an effort to illustrate the nature of fellow students' attitudes and magnitude of the problem.

Conclusion

From the information gathered from interviews and questionnaires the following observations can be made:

i. Most students are motivated by external or extrinsic factors. Even those who mention the love for teaching the young seem to do that as an afterthought, that is simply mentioned as a third or fourth or fifth reason for taking up the option. Respondents were not asked to rank their reasons for obvious reasons but the unconscious spontaneous 'ranking' they did reflects that most may not have been 'called'. This applies to the two groups of respondents, the Class of 2006 and that of 2008. This is a worrying phenomenon since the presence of the male ECD teacher, from a distance, will look like remarkable achievement in terms of deconstructing gender stereotyping in Early Childhood Development when in actual fact their attitude is 'mercenary'.

ii. Most of the ECD male students have ECD friends. At surface level this may appear a harmless, static but upon close scrutiny one may deduce that the course option has some sociometric bearing suggesting that there might be academic apartheid in some institutions of higher learning leading to some tension. Lecturers in such departments may naturally develop some protectionist tendencies towards 'their' students.

iii. Societal attitudes towards ECD Male teachers are at best described as hostile. This unfortunately includes some professionals or professionals in the making. Male ECD students are seen as perverted members of the community. Many respondents said there were uncomfortable leaving their young girl children or relatives in the hands of male teachers especially in the wake of rampant abuse of children as reported in the press which some regard only as the tip of an iceberg as

many more such cases go unreported and unrecorded. Concerted efforts need to be made to ensure such perceptions change for the better.

iv. Use of language: Some respondents used Shona language in their responses although English was used by the researchers as the medium of communication. As researchers we thought this was significant hence our quoting the responses verbatim. The reasons why they might have used their mother tongue were probably; 1) To show how the negative attitudes deeply touched them, and; 2) Because of their own limitations when it comes to use of English which are also evident in their responses quoted in this research. This may also vindicate some of the non-ECD respondents' view that the ECD option is taken by students who may be academically constrained. The language of instruction at ECD in Zimbabwe is the pupils' mother tongue hence the choice of ECD by some of the students who might have struggled to pass English Language, a pre-requisite for tertiary education in Zimbabwe and the medium of instruction in all other subjects except the indigenous languages.

v. Some prospective ECD teachers had to 'cross the floor' under pressure from traditional societal attitudes. There should be mechanisms in place to counsel such students. Pre-counseling can forearm such students to stand the anticipated heat.

vi. According to the LIC ECD male students who show some inkling of affection to join ECD are quickly whisked away under what he termed 'affirmative action'. This action may be understandable in the endeavour to destereotype ECD as a no go area for males but care should be taken not to create an image with unsuitable materials-(to avoid counting the mice with the tails) an action that only boosts numbers on paper but not the actual harvest. Such action gives a false image of gender parity. Concerted effort should be invested in advertising the programme during new students' orientation so that they choose course options when they are well informed of what is in store. Such an exercise will widen and deepen the pool from which more suitable candidates, both male and female, are chosen and chancers eliminated. To augment this more outreach programmes are required to educate society on the ECD project.

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